A guide to supplemental security income

A guide to SSI

Supplemental security income (SSI) is a Federal income maintenance program for the aged, blind, and disabled in the 50 States, the District of Columbia, and the Northern Mariana Islands. The program provides monthly payments to aged, blind, and disabled people who have little or no income and resources.

The Federal Government administers the SSI program through the Social Security Administration. It makes the basic payments to recipients, determines eligibility of claimants, and maintains a master record of recipients.

States are required to supplement the Federal payments to people who received a higher amount under State assistance programs that existed before 1974. They have the option to supplement the Federal payments to other recipients. The States also provide Medicaid, food stamps, and various social and rehabilitation services.

Even though the Social Security Administration runs the Federal program, SSI is not the same as social security.

The SSI program is financed from general funds of the U.S. Treasury—personal income taxes, corporation taxes, and other taxes. Social security is funded through the social security taxes paid by workers, employers, and self-employed people. The two programs also differ in other areas, such as the conditions of eligibility and the method of figuring payments.

This booklet is designed to assist groups and organizations who have contact with potential or present SSI recipients. It describes the SSI program in detail. A leaflet for potential SSI beneficiaries, *SSI for the aged, blind, and disabled,* is available at any social security office.

Eligibility

To be eligible for SSI, a person must be 65 or older or blind or disabled and have limited income and resources. He or she also must reside in the United States or the Northern Mariana Islands and be a U.S. citizen or an alien lawfully admitted for permanent residence.

Disabled or blind children, as well as adults, may be eligible for SSI. It makes no difference how young a person is.

The Federal Government does not place liens on recipients' homes, nor does the Federal law require support by relatives. But, in determining eligibility, the law assumes that a husband and wife who live together share their income and resources and that a child shares in the income and resources of his or her parents.

Since SSI payments can be reduced by other income, claimants must apply for any other money benefits due them. Social security works with claimants and helps them get any other benefits for which they are eligible. People who get SSI

checks can get social security checks, too, if they are eligible for both.

But, a person cannot get SSI payments and participate in the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program. If a parent or child is eligible under both programs, the parent can choose whichever one best suits the family.

People who live in public institutions generally are not eligible for SSI payments. But, there are three exceptions to this rule. A person who lives in a publicly operated community residence which serves no more than 16 people may be eligible for SSI payments. A person who is a resident of a public institution *primarily* to attend approved educational or vocational training provided in the institution may be eligible. If a person is in a public *or* private health facility which receives substantial payments on his or her behalf under Medicaid, the person may be eligible, but the SSI payment is reduced.

The eligibility of an alien who is being sponsored and who first applies for SSI payments after September 30, 1980, depends on the income and resources of the sponsor and his or her spouse. Of course, the alien's own income and resources also affect his or her eligibility. During the 3 years after the alien's entry into the U.S., part of the sponsor's income and resources are considered to be the alien's and count in determining the alien's eligibility and payment amount. After the 3-year period, only the alien's own income and resources count. This provision does not apply to refugees, aliens who become blind or disabled after entering the U.S., or aliens who have been granted political asylum.

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Basic Eligibility Conditions

Aged	65 or older
Blind	Vision no better than 20/200 or limited visual field of 20 degrees or less with the best corrective eyeglasses
Disabled	A physical or mental impairment which prevents a person from doing any substantial work and is expected to last at least 12 months or result in death
Resource Limits	$1,500 for an individual $2,250 for a couple

(See page 5. Not all resources are counted in determining eligibility.)

Income Limits	Below $238 a month for an individual Below $357 a month for a couple

(See page 6. Not all income is counted in determining eligibility. Also, a person may have income above the limit and possibly be eligible for a State supplement only, but the income levels vary with each State.)

U.S. citizen or immigrant lawfully admitted for permanent residence

Resident of the U.S. or the Northern Mariana Islands

Disabled must accept vocational rehabilitation if offered

Disabled addicts and alcoholics must accept treatment if offered

Disability and blindness

A person 18 or older is considered disabled if a physical or mental impairment prevents him or her from doing any substantial gainful work and is expected to last for at least 12 months or to result in death.

A child under 18 may be found disabled if he or she has a physical or mental impairment that is comparable in severity to one that would prevent an adult from working and is expected to last at least 12 months or result in death.

Retarded people may be considered disabled, depending on their IQ and other factors. For more information, contact any social security office.

Regardless of age, a person whose vision is no better than 20/200 or who has a limited visual field of 20 degrees or less with the best corrective eyeglasses is considered blind. If a person's visual impairment is not severe enough to meet the definition of blindness, he or she still might qualify as a disabled person.

Disabled and blind claimants are referred to appropriate agencies for rehabilitation services.

Disabled drug addicts or alcoholics are referred for appropriate treatment if it is available at an approved facility or institution. A drug addict or alcoholic is not eligible for payments if he or she fails to undergo treatment or to comply with the terms and requirements of available treatment. SSI payments for a disabled alcoholic or drug addict must be made to a representative payee on the beneficiary's behalf.

Resources

An individual may have resources (assets) of up to $1,500; a couple may have resources of up to $2,250.

The resource limit for a couple applies even if only one member of a couple is eligible. The couple's resources are determined as if both members were eligible.

If a couple has been separated or living apart for over 6 months, each person is treated as an individual.

If an unmarried child living at home is under 18, the parents' assets are considered to be the child's. (Before October 1980, the parents' assets were deemed to a child until age 21 if the child was attending school. If a child 18-21 was receiving SSI payments on October 1, 1980, deeming of the parents' assets will continue if it is to the child's advantage.)

The term "resources" includes real estate, personal property, household goods, savings and checking accounts, and stocks or bonds.

Not all resources are counted in determining the amount of a claimant's resources for SSI purposes. A home (and adjacent land) which is the claimant's principal place of residence is not counted, regardless of its value.

Personal effects or household goods with a total equity value of $2,000 or less are not counted. If the total equity value exceeds $2,000, the excess counts. The equity value is what an item can be sold for, less the amount of any legal debt against it.

If a person owns one car, only the portion of the current market value which exceeds $4,500 may be counted as a resource. The value of one car isn't counted at all if it is used by the household for transportation to a job or to a place for regular treatment of a specific medical problem or if it is modified for use by a handicapped person. If a person owns any other cars, the equity value of each is counted. Also, under certain conditions, the value of any car a person owns may not be counted if it is used for self-support.

Life insurance policies with a total face value of $1,500 or less per person are not counted.

Assets which a blind or disabled person needs to fulfill a plan for self-support are disregarded.

Also excluded are disaster assistance and certain community stocks held by natives of Alaska.

A person whose countable resources exceed the limit by a small amount may still qualify for SSI payments if he or she agrees to sell the excess assets within a specified time. This helps the person who owns property which is providing little or no income but which cannot be sold quickly at a fair price. Time limits for disposal are 6 months for real estate and 3 months for personal property. SSI payments received pending the sale of the assets may have to be repaid out of the proceeds of the sale. Refusal to dispose of excess assets after payments have started means the recipient will be found ineligible and will have to return any payments he or she has received.

Income

An individual is eligible for SSI if he or she has income of less than $238 a month; a couple is eligible with income of less than $357 a month.

If only one member of a couple qualifies for SSI, part of the ineligible member's income is considered to be the eligible spouse's.

If a couple has been separated or living apart for over 6 months, each person is treated as an individual.

If an unmarried child living at home is under 18, some of the parents' income is considered to be the child's. Allowances are made for the parents' work and living expenses and for other children living in the home. After these allowances are deducted from the parents' income, the remaining amount is used to decide if the child meets the income requirements. (Before October 1980, part of the parents' income was deemed to a child until age 21 if the child was attending school. If

a child 18-21 was receiving SSI payments on October 1, 1980, deeming of the parents' income will continue if it is to the child's advantage.)

The term "income" includes cash, checks, items received "in kind" such as food and shelter, and many items which would not be considered income for Federal or other tax purposes. Wages, net earnings from self-employment, earned income tax credits, and/or income received from sheltered workshops are considered *earned* income. Social security benefits, workers' or veterans compensation, annuities, rent, and interest are examples of *unearned* income.

The following income is not counted in determining the amount of a claimant's income:

1
$20 a month of earned or unearned income (except unearned income such as veterans disability pensions or aid to families);

2
$65 a month of earned income plus one-half of earned income over $65 a month *or, if there is no unearned income*, $85 a month of earned income plus one-half of the remainder;

3
Refund of taxes paid on real property or on food purchases;

4
Assistance by a State or local political subdivision or Indian tribe which is based on need;

5
Tuition and fees of grants, scholarships, and fellowships;

6
Home-grown produce consumed by the individual and his or her family;

7
Irregular or infrequent earned income if it totals no more than $30 in a calendar quarter;

8
Irregular or infrequent unearned income if it totals no more than $60 a quarter;

9
Foster care payments for a child who is not receiving SSI payments but who has been placed in the recipient's household by an approved agency;

10
One-third of child support payments received by an eligible child from an absent parent;

11
Earnings (up to $1,200 a quarter, but not more than $1,620 a year) of an unmarried child who is a student under 22;

12
Income necessary for fulfillment of an approved plan to achieve self-support established for a blind or disabled person;

13
Work expenses of an eligible person who is blind;

14
Effective December 1, 1980, impairment-related work expenses of an eligible person who is disabled;

15
Food stamp assistance;

16
Housing assistance from Federal housing programs run by State and local subdivisions;

17
Benefits, compensation, or items from ACTION programs run by State and local subdivisions;
18
Relocation assistance provided because of property acquisition for Federal or federally assisted projects;
19
Incentive allowances and certain types of reimbursement for individuals in training under CETA programs administered by State and local subdivisions;
20
Grants or loans to undergraduate students from the Department of Education's educational programs;
21
Most Federal judgment distribution payments to members of Indian tribes.

Federal payments

The maximum Federal SSI payment is $238 a month for a person living alone and $357 a month for a couple. These payment levels will increase in the future as the cost-of-living rises.

If the person or the couple has retirement or other unearned income—such as social security benefits, annuities, rents, interest—$20 a month is ignored, and the rest is deducted from the SSI payment, dollar for dollar.

If the person or the couple has earnings from current work, $65 a month is ignored, and $1 is deducted from the SSI payment for each additional $2 of earnings. (If earnings are the only type of income the person or couple has, then $85 a month is exempted before the one-for-two rule applies.)

The SSI payment is reduced by one-third if an eligible person or couple is living in another person's household and receiving support and maintenance in kind from that person. This reduction takes the place of counting the dollar value of the support and maintenance as income.

The payment also is reduced if an eligible person or couple is in a hospital or health facility for an entire month and Medicaid is paying over half the cost of the care. If only one member of an eligible couple is in a health facility, the income of each member is considered separately in determining the amount of SSI payment.

If a person is outside the area of the United States and the Northern Mariana Islands for a whole month, no payment can be made for that month.

The following examples give you an idea of how payments are figured for SSI recipients 65 or older. In the case of blind and disabled recipients, there are special income exclusions and certain other provisions—such as the trial work period for the disabled—that do not apply to the aged. The examples show monthly figures because SSI payments are made on a monthly basis. But, ordinarily, income is figured on the basis of a calendar quarter.

1

Sam Johnson is 66, lives alone in a small house he owns, and his only income is his social security benefit of $133.90 a month. He gets $124.30 of this in his check, after his $9.60 Medicare medical insurance premium is deducted.

Income not from current earnings:		
Monthly social security benefit	$ 133.90	
Less $20	−20.00	
Remainder: Countable income not from current earnings	$ 113.90	$ 113.90
Income from current earnings:	None	+None
Total countable income for the month		$ 113.90
Basic SSI amount for the month	$ 238.00	
Less total countable income	−113.90	
Monthly SSI payment	$ 124.10	$ 124.10
His social security benefit is		+133.90
So his total money income will be		$ 258.00

2

Now let's say Mr. Johnson is married and lives with his wife who is 65. She gets $67 a month from social security—from which a Medicare medical insurance premium is deducted. The couple's total social security income is $200.90 a month.

Income not from current earnings:		
Couple's monthly social security benefits	$ 200.90	
Less $20	−20.00	
Remainder: Countable income not from current earnings	$ 180.90	$ 180.90
Income from current earnings:	None	+ None
Total countable income for the month		$ 180.90
Basic SSI amount for the month	$ 357.00	
Less total countable income	−180.90	
Monthly SSI payment	$ 176.10	$ 176.10
Their social security benefits are		+ 200.90
Their total monthly income will be		$ 377.00

3

Mr. Johnson takes a weekend job which pays $100 a month gross wages. Here's how these earnings affect Mr. and Mrs. Johnson's total income.

Income not from current earnings:		
Couple's monthly social security benefits	$ 200.90	
Less $20	−20.00	
Remainder: Countable income not from current earnings	$ 180.90	$ 180.90
Income from current earnings:		
Wages for the month	$ 100.00	
Less $65	−65.00	
Divide remainder by 2	2/35.00	
Countable income from current earnings	17.50	+17.50
Total countable income for the month		$ 198.40
Basic SSI amount for the month	$ 357.00	
Less total countable income	−198.40	
Monthly SSI payment	$158.60	$ 158.60
Their social security benefit is		+200.90
And Mr. Johnson's monthly earnings are		+100.00
So their total monthly income will be		$ 459.50

4

Joe Jones, 68, lives with his daughter and son-in-law. Joe receives $99 in social security benefits. Since Joe lives with someone who provides food and shelter, the basic SSI amount is reduced by one-third. This reduction takes the place of counting the value of the support and maintenance as income.

Support/maintenance deduction:		
Basic SSI monthly amount	$ 238.00	
Reduced by one-third	−79.33	
	$ 158.67	
Income not from current earnings:		
Monthly social security benefit	$ 99.00	
Less $20	−20.00	
Remainder: Countable income not from current earnings	$ 79.00	$ 79.00
Income from current earnings:	None	+None
Total countable income for the month		$ 79.00
Basic SSI amount for the month	$ 158.67	
Less total countable income	−79.00	
Monthly SSI payment	$ 79.67	$ 79.67
And his social security check is		+99.00
Joe Jones' total monthly income will be		$ 178.67

State payments and services

Some States and local subdivisions make interim assistance payments to SSI claimants who are waiting for a decision on their eligibility for Federal payments. The State or local government can be reimbursed out of the beneficiary's first SSI check.

States may add to the Federal SSI payments. If the State's payment is made regularly and is based on need, it is not considered income in figuring the Federal payment.

To encourage States to supplement the Federal payments, the law gives the State the option of having the Federal Government administer the State supplement and pay the administrative costs. The Federal Government guarantees the State against any increase over its 1972 costs for payments to the aged, blind, and disabled. The State must agree that the supplement will go to all eligible aged, blind, and disabled people. But, the State may set its own residence requirements and may disregard additional amounts of income. A State which chooses to administer its own supplemental payment pays all of its own administrative costs.

All States are required to add to the SSI payments for recipients who received an amount greater than the Federal payment under the former State plans. If the State chooses, the Federal Government can administer this mandatory supplement, too.

In most States, people who are eligible for SSI payments also are eligible for Medicaid, which can pay health care expenses. SSI recipients also may be eligible for social services provided by the State or county. Depending on where the recipient lives, these services may include housekeeping help, arrangements for meals, or transportation. More information is available at the local public assistance office or any social security office.

Applying for SSI

People who think they may be eligible for SSI should apply as soon as possible at any social security office. No payments can be made for months before an application is filed.

It will be helpful if the applicant has the following information:

- A record of his or her social security number, if available
- Proof of age, unless the applicant is already getting social security checks
- The latest tax bill or assessment notice if the applicant owns real estate other than his or her home
- Bank books, insurance policies, and other papers that show the applicant's resources
- Motor vehicle registration if he or she owns a car

- Pay slips or other papers that show the applicant's income
- Medical records or other information about the applicant's disability or blindness (if reports are not available, the names and addresses of doctors, hospitals, and clinics that have provided treatment and care, and the names and addresses of social workers and institution superintendents)
- Information about a husband's or wife's income and resources if the applicant lives with his or her spouse
- Information about the parents' income and resources if the applicant is a child
- Information about the sponsor's income and resources if the applicant is an alien who is being sponsored

People should not delay applying if they don't have all of this information. The social security office can help the applicant obtain whatever is needed.

Processing SSI claims

The social security office takes applications and obtains and evaluates documentation needed for identity, income, and resources. It also determines if a representative payee is needed and, if so, appoints one.

If a claimant appears to meet all the eligibility requirements and is in need of immediate cash assistance to meet a financial emergency, the social security office may issue an emergency advance payment. The amount of the advance payment will be withheld from the first regular SSI check. If it is established that the claimant is not eligible, the advance payment may have to be repaid.

For aged claimants, the social security office determines eligibility.

For a disabled or blind person who is currently receiving social security disability benefits, the social security office may immediately authorize payments without referral to the State for a medical review.

If a formal medical determination of the claimant's disability or blindness is needed, it is made by the State disability determination services. The social security office develops all non-medical proofs, and any evidence pertinent to disability and blindness is sent to the State.

A claimant who is otherwise eligible and found presumptively disabled or presumptively blind can get payments for up to 3 months while it is being medically determined if he or she is disabled or blind. These payments will not be considered an overpayment if it is finally decided that the claimant is not disabled or not blind.

Redeterminations

The SSI law requires that each beneficiary's case be periodically reviewed to make certain that the beneficiary is still eligible for SSI and that his or her payment amount is correct. This review is called a redetermination. The beneficiary will be asked to provide information about his or her income, resources, living arrangements, and bank accounts. It's a good idea for the beneficiary to keep savings or checking account statements because he or she may need them for the redetermination.

In some instances, the redetermination can be conducted by mail or telephone. But, in other cases, the beneficiary has to visit the social security office for an interview. Local social security offices notify beneficiaries when it is time for their redetermination.

Beneficiary responsibilities

Beneficiaries are responsible for reporting changes which may affect their eligibility or payments. A beneficiary should report any change in his or her income, resources, household or living arrangements, or marital status. Beneficiaries also must notify social security if they enter or leave an institution; leave the area of the U.S. and Northern Mariana Islands; or move or change their address. Students between 18 and 22 must report if they start or stop attending school. Disabled and blind recipients must let social security know if they take a job or become self-employed or if their condition improves. If a beneficiary is a sponsored alien, any changes in the sponsor's income and resources must be reported during the 3 years after the alien's entry into the U.S. And, social security should be notified if a beneficiary can't manage his or her funds, if a drug addict or alcoholic stops treatment, or if a beneficiary dies. Reports can be made by phone or mail or in person at any social security office.

Right to appeal

A beneficiary has the right to appeal any decision made about his or her eligibility or payment amount. There are four steps in the appeals process—reconsideration, hearing, Appeals Council review, and Federal court action—and there is a time limit for requesting each one. Social security offices will assist recipients in requesting an appeal.

For more information

If you want more information about the SSI program, please contact any social security office. The people there will be glad to answer questions. They also can give you a leaflet which explains how the SSI program works in your particular State. The office phone number is listed in the local telephone directory under Social Security Administration.

Already has denial

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